

Community Assistantship Program

Itasca County Resorts and Tourism

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Prepared in partnership with
Itasca County Historical Society

Prepared by
Andrea Burns
Graduate Student

University of Minnesota
September, 2002

CAP Report 109

June 2006

CAP is a cross-college, cross-campus University of Minnesota initiative coordinated by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

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Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)
University of Minnesota
330 HHH Center
301--19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

Phone: (612) 625-1551
Fax: (612) 626-0273
E-mail: cura@umn.edu
Web site: <http://www.cura.umn.edu>

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Andrea Burns
University of Minnesota
Project Summary
Itasca County Resorts and Tourism
September 22, 2002

Goals and Objectives of Project

As an intern at the Itasca County Historical Society in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, the primary purpose of my work was to conduct archival research on the history of resorts and tourism in Itasca County. Since the nineteenth century, the lumber and mining industries has provided the main source of economic revenue for Itasca county, which was organized in 1891 (Grand Rapids is the county seat). However, the Itasca County Historical Society felt that resorts and tourism may have played just as significant a role in the economic, social, and cultural development of Grand Rapids and the rest of Itasca county as did the lumber and mining industries during their heydays. Indeed, a significant portion of Itasca county's revenue is drawn from the resort and tourist industry.

Thus, my research focused on answering questions such as: when did tourism become an integral part of Itasca county? Why did tourists come to Itasca county, where did they come from, and where did they go once they were in Itasca county? How did tourists arrive at these destinations, and what did tourists do once at the resorts? How did the resort industry develop and change over the years, in conjunction with economic and social trends? How have resorts—and year-round residents—responded to the demands of tourists? Finally, what overall impact has tourism had on Itasca County?

Tasks and Tools Utilized

My tasks varied during the course of this project. As the historical society staff is quite small, I was responsible for beginning the research on this project and determining its direction. My tasks included:

- Research, copy and summarize articles in the *Grand Rapids Herald Review* from 1891-1950 in order to track any mention of resorts and tourism—whether through advertisements, news editorials, or articles on the arrival of tourists at the beginning of each season.
- Assess photographic, manuscript, and oral history materials in the Karjala Research Center (archives housed in the Historical Society) to determine their usefulness for the exhibit.
- Visit resorts currently in operation and contact present-day owners of resorts in Itasca County to determine if they had any artifacts (brochures, letters, photographs) that might be useful for the exhibit. If the resort had a long history (many resorts in Itasca county date to the 1910s-1920s), discuss this history with them.
- Prepare two presentations for the Itasca County Historical Society Board of Directors.
- Write articles for the *Bovey Scenic News* about the ongoing research for this project.

Research Findings

1890s-1900s

Based on my newspaper and manuscript research, it is clear that Itasca county boosters during the 1890s and 1900s primarily focused on drawing permanent settlers to Itasca county, with tourism as an afterthought. Lumberjacks frequented the hotels and

restaurants around Itasca county and “first-class” provisions were scarce for other visitors. However, during the 1910s the *Grand Rapids Herald Review* took increasing note of the economic advantages of bringing tourists to Itasca county. Why not capitalize on Itasca county’s natural landscape of numerous lakes and woods and promote it to commercial business, especially during the summer? Accordingly, the *Review* began to call for the formation of community improvement associations (such as the “Ten Thousand Lakes Association”) that would focus on this aspect of Itasca county (which the *Review* thought was being overlooked by city leaders—a persistent theme over the years).

1920s-1930s

During the 1920s, with more and more people buying cars, the resort industry begins to flourish. This is the decade in which many resorts get their start—such as Bowen’s Lodge, Arcadia Lodge, Eagle’s Nest, etc. Camps for children, such as Camp Mishawaka (founded 1910) also draw families from places like Indiana and Oklahoma. By the late 1920s, business is booming (Chicago gangster Al Capone is rumored to have visited Arcadia Lodge!). The mass production of the automobile—and the hordes of people newly wealthy from the stock market—can naturally be linked to the “Good Roads” movement in Itasca county. With better roads, more and more people were able to travel to these out-of-the-way resorts in small communities like Deer River and Marcell. Prior to the construction of roads, tourists often reached resorts and camps by boat.

With a greater influx of tourists every summer, the economies of these communities began to be more and more dependent on them; the *Herald-Review* even compares tourism to the mining industry. While the *Herald Review* continually publishes editorials welcoming tourists, it also occasionally cautions its citizens to make sure to attract other sources of income. Another intriguing theme that emerges during this period is the focus on the need to preserve northern Minnesota’s natural resources—woods, wildlife habitat, etc—for the benefit of the tourist and the year-long resident; some editorials caution against uninhibited commercial development.

The Great Depression certainly affected the county and the resort industry; however, resorts still continued to operate during this period. The gasoline shortages and speed limit reductions during World War II also significantly affected the number of tourists willing to travel all the way to Grand Rapids; however, the tourist industry rebounds during the prosperity of the 1950s.

Visits to Resorts

My visits to the resorts and discussions with resort owners were one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of my research. My travels around Itasca county took me to resorts well off the beaten track, some 40-60 miles away from Grand Rapids and deep in the heart of the Chippewa National Forest. Several resort owners or former resort owners had scrapbooks on their resorts, with materials dating back to the 1900s; a few former resort owners had boxes of artifacts like old postcards, photographs, quilts, and bottles. One of the themes that emerged during my research was the important role of the wives of resort and camp owners in maintaining the resorts; while their husbands got most of the attention, it was the women who usually were in charge of the daily operation of a resort: cooking, cleaning, and meeting the needs of guests.

Another important theme that emerged is the important link between resorts and local communities. Even businesses that weren't directly tied to the resort industry—such as grocery stores—were affected by the resort and tourism economy. Carl Newstrom (whose family owned a grocery store in Marcell, MN) states that not just groceries, but gas, beer, fishing tackle, live bait, and fishing licenses were among the products distributed to locals and tourists. He also served as a resource to lost tourists on their way to a resort. (see *Memories of a Small Town: Marcell, MN*, p. 65).

It is also important to note that the histories of many of these resorts are often tied to the Native American community. For example, long before Cutfoot Sioux Inn (on Cutfoot Sioux lake) became a resort, the site was used as a fur-trading post by French *voyageurs* and the Chippewa. It is clear, based on my research, how intertwined the history of Itasca county is with the history of resorts and tourism.

Final Outcome of Project

The research results for this project has been organized into a format that will hopefully be easily accessible for the historical society staff; each decade of newspaper research has been summarized, with important primary quotes clearly labeled. Manuscripts have also been organized according to their usefulness for the project, and useful photographs have been located and withdrawn from the archives. I typed a list of oral history questions that may be sent to other resort owners, and I've summarized each interview I conducted with resort owners.

The staff will assess the research and transform it into an exhibit on resorts and tourism in Itasca county; this exhibit should be ready sometime in 2003. Additional research needs to be done on resorts and tourism from the 1950s-present day. The contacts I made with resort owners during this summer should be helpful when the staff is ready to assemble artifacts for the exhibit.